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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature regarding some of the past practices of discipline and to explore the changes in discipline that have been made in our schools, the alternatives that have resulted, and a specific approach--in-school suspension--that has taken root in contemporary education as a result of this change. A review of the literature reveals that discipline problems in school are omnipresent. Formerly prevalent disciplinary attitudes were based on the concept of retribution, as manifested in severe punitive actions that were traditionally justified on moral grounds. More recently, compromising attitudes have taken hold that temper discipline with humane sensitivity and that focus on rehabilitation rather than retribution. In-school suspension, while not the panacea originally promised, is nevertheless emerging as one of the more reasonably effective techniques in use today for addressing discipline problems. (Author/TE)

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In-School Suspensions

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A review of the literature reveals that discipline problems in the schools are omnipresent. Formerly prevalent disciplinary attitudes were based on the concept of retribution and manifested themselves in severe punitive actions that were justified, historically, on moral grounds. More recently, compromising attitudes of discipline, tempered with humane sensitivity, that focus on rehabilitation rather than retribution have taken hold.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature regarding some of the past practices of discipline, to explore the changes in discipline that have been made in our schools, the alternatives that have resulted, and a specific program that has taken root in contemporary education as a result of this change.

Student discipline problems have been present in our school system since their inception, and discipline has become a national concern. "Discipline in the schools is consistently ranked as the number one problem by parents, teachers, and administrators today." (Brown, 1984, Doctoral Dissertation,p.135).The problem of discipline is very complex, and methods for handling discipline problems in schools, nationwide, are quite varied. In addition, the sheer size of school populations and the emphasis on human rights, especially student rights, require more awareness and safeguards than previously existed.

Historically, standard disciplinary procedures remained relatively unchanged up to the present century and conventional methods often prevailed. (Harris 1981 p. 13). The usual procedures exercised mild to severe corporal punishment, detention, removal from school, criticism, or punishment assignments. The primitive model for severe corporal punishment and strong admonishment can be traced to ancient cultures using this punishment as a method for control of people, right up to our own colonial experiences. For example, Harris (1981) stated that "...colonial education lent itself well to the disciplining of the flesh because of the prevailing assumption that people were, by nature, corruptible and in need of being reformed." Humiliation, degradation, and severe punishments were neither unusual nor considered inhumane for the tough times and lives of these colonial people. They were influenced by a strong primitive morality that was strongly enforced, though reluctantly accepted.

Although the whipping posts and lashings over the backs of desks are passé, there are atavistic remnants in the form of present-day laws calling for strong corporal punishment in most states. (Streva 1983 p. 3). With the influence of people like Freud, Montessori, and Dewey, the outlook on child discipline slowly changed toward more progressive, humanistic approaches.

The progressive movement, as a serious educational policy in the public schools, never totally rooted itself to a large degree in our society. It usually fought for position (often losing) against prevailing notions of strong discipline as a means of control. (Streva 1983 p. 2).

Since discipline problems in the schools continued to be a distasteful presence, the emphasis remained on strong responses to them. Although these responses were reduced in their harshness physically, expulsions from school continued to take precedence, since this was a more expeditious method for gaining immediate control in most situations. One of the prevailing arguments was "The majority of students who are interested in learning should not have to suffer from the constant disruption of the very few." (Shi 1980 p. 11). It was hoped that this kind of suspension would force parent involvement and alleviate the condition. Of course, like many ideas in education, what appears to be effective is often indiscriminately used for problem-solving because of its ease, regardless of the consequences. Sometimes, "Schools utilized external suspension as the sole penalty for most disciplinary problems." (Beaman 1978 p. 7). Although this was not the only method commonly used it certainly ran second, and often parallel, to corporal punishment.

Gradually things changed. With the advent of the baby boom of the early 1930's, schools began to make room for the burgeoning new increase in student populations. Accommodating all the new students required massive expansion and the need for more control techniques to handle these large numbers forced into close concentrations. In addition, with the impact of mass television exposure on human awareness and mass cultural and political conflicts, the schools began to "...come under increasing pressure from civil rights and child advocacy groups to abandon their 'outmoded' methods of discipline in favor of more 'humane methods' of resolving student problems." (Beman 1978 p. 15). Deeper sentiments went so far as to generalize that "...society, in general, has never been especially understanding or compassionate about the disaffected and disrupted students." (Hurley 1972 p. 58).

It took some insight to realize that the students most often affected by suspensions were in the greatest need of some sort of socio-educational setting to overcome their deficits or to compensate for a low socio-economic status. Unfortunately, some students could have remained in school and done well except for a problem with just one teacher. At times, the student was not to blame for what could be considered an appropriate response on the student's part. In addition, the burden on families unable to leave their jobs and supervise their children compounded the problem, creating a social threat to the community. This threat of an unsupervised, troubled, teenager home alone or on the streets, increased the suspended students' chances of contact with a delinquent subculture. (Streva 1983).

Due to this uncertainty and conflict, it wasn't long before schools looked for alternatives to resolve the problem and relieve

the widespread criticism that led to conclusions such as "...punishment does not work...if they were so effective they would not have to be used again and again on the same children." (Carter 1973 p. 19).

The new shift did not totally halt the use of strong disciplinary actions but it changed the emphasis from retribution to rehabilitation. Although corporal punishment is by no means dead, and does have a sympathetic audience, most often, it is not the primary means used to discipline. However, we cannot attribute this change to ethical concerns of the schools themselves. This is a direct result of the corresponding laws that encompass student rights through a mandated system of due process that is constitutionally based. This process was generated through a Supreme Court decision in the case of Wood vs. Strickland. (95 S. Ct. 725, 1975). This case concerned charges brought by a student against a school district for interfering with his due process rights. It went through the court system, and the Supreme Court decision in favor of the student changed the direction of educational policy in this area. In addition, the Supreme Court intervened in another case (Goss vs. Lopes) providing a ray of hope for those concerned about the flagrant use of suspension and expulsion as disciplinary procedures (95 S. Ct. 726 1975).

Furthermore, with the enormous impact on the schools by the report of the Childrens Defense Fund, suspensions were to be "severely questioned as to their efficacy." (Childrens Defense Fund 1974 p. 121). Consequently, schools began to attend to the seriousness of this issue. Moreover, this study contradicted many of the prevailing attitudes about the "constructive effects of suspensions that permeated the whole school system." (Streva 1983 p. 5).

Advocating for humane treatment of students of all types, the Fund pointed out the inherent aspects of racism and the enormous

imbalance between ethnic minority make-up of school populations and the imbalance of minority suspensions. With this avalanche of evidence and the degree of external conflict, the seeds for certain changes regarding the issue of student discipline fully emerged, replacing some of the antiquated and narrow notions that formerly prevailed.

The literature reveals that the evidence that challenged out-of-school suspensions was extraordinarily effective in altering entrenched attitudes. The literature broke the traditional framework of opinion by presenting proof that "...millions of children are being suspended from school," (Cuttle 1975 p. 5) and that "the numbers of suspensions nationally were staggering, defied the imagination and conflicted with sound educational philosophy." (Carter 1975 p. 6). "The system was predominantly racist," (Neill 1976 p. 11) it was "extremely sexist," (Streva 1983 p. 6) and was unbelievably "self-defeating." (Shi 1980 p. 17).

It came as no surprise that the schools had little choice but to respond to these forceful protestations. Consequently, they began to search for alternative disciplinary procedures that would be more effective, less controversial, less likely to be challenged in the courts, and would work within the students' due process rights. Thus, with the changing tide, brought about through little effort by the school system, the schools reluctantly managed to develop reasonably acceptable alternatives. Although these alternatives were by no means altruistically motivated, they did result in a temporary abatement of the prevailing conflict over discipline through suspension and expulsion.

Alternatives arose in the form of class detentions, extended after-school detentions, alternative-education programs, after-school

clinics for maladjusted children, intensive counseling programs, and in-school suspensions. This does not exhaust the list of creative alternatives but presents a sample of the options developed.

In-school suspension, though not the sole predominant force is gradually taking hold and seems to be one of the more reasonably effective techniques in use today for combating discipline problems. "The concept of in-school suspensions continues to become increasingly popular." (Mendez 1977 p. 11). (In-school suspension refers to programs that suspend a student within the confines of a school while providing instructional services rather than putting the student on out-of-school suspension). The reasons are many for the acceptance, popularity, and success of such programs: they are flexible; they keep kids in school; they help decrease the dropout rate; they account for a student's actions because the student is present in school; they involve the family; and they add an overall flavor of optimism for improvement." (Saunders & Yarbrough 1976 p. 333).

According to the literature, in-school suspensions, while not the panacea originally promised, have certainly shown great possibilities. But some of the dramatic results reported seem to be overemphasized and appear to perpetuate the reputation of innovative programs that generate an initial enthusiasm then, cease. The literature is drenched with reports of immediate successes, but a closer look at most findings reveals that many problems exist in type of program and, quite often, the failures are glossed over or rarely mentioned. some that are mentioned often rationalize their reasons for poor results and "...substantial efforts remain to be carried out if alternative programs are to be justified on academic grounds." (Hess 1979 p. 51).

Despite these mixed results, in-school suspensions are relatively

new (the earliest reports go back to 1975) but are gaining widespread use following sound educational philosophy. Although they do not literally follow humanistic philosophy, they parallel some of the philosophic attitudes espoused by Russeau, Montessori, Dewey, and other humanistic educators. Of course this is only a beginning, but it is now firmly established that alternate programming opens doors to new constructs that may indeed benefit not only the students, for whom these programs were designed, but also those who have an initial tendency to resist such ideas the most. Although there are many problems inherent in new ideas like in-school suspension and other innovative programs in the schools, "the success of these programs depends on the abilities and commitment of the people working with disrupted youth." (Neill 1976 p. 4). If we don't have commitment to helping these young, disaffected people we can expect to have an overwhelming community of disaffected adults in the years to come.

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